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ABSTRACT

The author, a student with learning problems, relates incidents from first grade to high school which point out the negative effects of labeling. (SBH)

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LEARNING DISABLED: SOMETHING HAS TO BE DONE

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Learning disabled, juvenile delinquent, social misfit, teenage incorrigible; schizophrenic, psychopath, failure, mentally retarded, culturally disadvantaged; unstable, lazy, crazy. If you are in my age category and labeled any one of these, the chances are you have been deprived of happiness a good self-image, adequate education and appropriate employment. School and Society label you because of their lack of understanding and inability to provide for individual differences. In the process of labeling, they may destroy you and be diminished themselves.

I'll never forget an incident in the First Grade when my teacher changed my grade on the first test from an A to a B without an explanation. I lost confidence and interest in school. I resorted to day-dreaming except at recess, lunch, and physical education. I watched the clock to know how long I had to sit before it was time to go home.

The Second Grade was no improvement. It seems that there was something I couldn't do as well as other children--namely, follow verbal directions. I looked at my classmate's desk tops to see what we were supposed to do. The teacher announced to the WHOLE CLASS that I "had a neck as long as a giraffe's". I was puzzled because Mother had always said I shouldn't wear turtleneck sweaters with such a short neck.

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The Third Grade teacher was alright but multiplication proved to be my undoing. I tried to understand but I couldn't remember how to do it. When it came to multiples of multiples, my head acted like a rubberband. It stretched to the correct 4x4 is 16 but shrank back to the secure 8 I had learned in adding. What a nightmare! My Mother and I screamed at each other over flashcards of multiples during my "free time" in the evenings. It wasn't enough for the school to pressure me in the classroom. It had to interfere with home life and ruined my good standing with my parents.

In the Fourth Grade, my teacher found me in the hall at the wrong time and gave me my first label. She called me the "Devil's Disciple". Naturally I wanted to do the right thing so I went around conjuring up schemes with my best friend to act on our new Master's behalf. After all, it's better to be on the wrong side of a teacher than it is to have the Devil mad at you!

"I never promised you a rose garden" they say. But they never warned me to expect a briar patch. Along with having auditory processing and discrimination difficulties, mirror image reversals, dyscalculia, and hyperactivity, I'm also disorganized. Keep that in mind when you read about Grade 7.

I had to remember that I had six classes and teachers, tonsof homework--when I couldn't remember to wear underwear until the 2nd Grade, or to carry shoes with snow boots until the 3rd; or to return library books until the 5th. How was I supposed to remember that I had six books to read or where my locker was or that it was gym time so bring your tennis shoes; or there's a History test Monday and one in Health

on Thursday. I never managed to cope with this complex system and failed all the way.

My Father was the one least able to accept my performance. He decided to beat the A's into me. Out camethe belts and boards and you've got instant FEAR! He's really not mean. He just didn't know what else to do. I learned that when Authority doesn't know what to do, it resorts to beating you. Society locks you up, drugs or threatens you. School fails you, puts you on probation or expels you.

My Mother was distraught, but not just over my grades. She couldn't deal with my Father's attitude toward me. She sent me off to a private school for girls for the 9th Grade. I was 14 and naive enough to go since it seemed better to be 3000 miles away from an "eggbeater" like my Father than to play the role of scrambled eggs.

I went away smiling but got into serious trouble within three days. I didn't know that seniors had certain privileges and organized the freshmen to rebel against the upper classmen. If I had known what was in store for me, I would have ignored the entire situation. The student body isolated me or used me for a scapegoat. I began to get unstable. Another factor seemed to be contributing to my problems. Sugar and starch seemed to poison my system, making me have nightmares, amnesia, and emotional distress. I was failing from learning disabilities, disturbed by the starchy institutional diet, and scapegoat by my classmates. I became severely depressed and finally attempted suicide.

The school couldn't cope with me and sent me home. I returned to public school but again was excluded. I ran away from my Father 15 times. When I returned to private school the next year, I decided to

have a good time. I turned to street drugs. The school--thinking me weird anyway--didn't pay much attention for wasn't it "normal for me to be crazy"? In March I admitted I had taken acid* and out the door I went again. My parents, in desperation took me to a psychiatrist.

I spent 9 months of my sixteenth year in a psychiatric unit for adolescents at $2000 a month. I was changed into a more social being with a better self-image. I won't tell you about the drugs we took there or about the aggressive acts we committed; or the attempted suicides of other people. I came out looking fine but knowing more about the not-so-bright side of the world.

I managed to keep my sanity during the last three months of the 11th Grade by not spending weekends on campus. I became addicted to amphetamines. For most of the 12th Grade I participated with the "Jesus Freaks." Although that was enough to drive ordinary people crazy, I remained stable throughout this new weirdness. If anyone knows how not to be crazy, I do!

In my Senior year, my high school and vocational rehabilitation counselors said I wasn't "college material". I dropped out of school completely. After several months of idleness, I found a nurses' aid job, saved some money and went to Colorado. I almost died of an overdose of drugs and returned to Minnesota. I took a live-in baby sitting job and enrolled in Junior College. I failed the first two quarters--still not knowing I was learning disabled.

My luck changed when I was directed to the diagnostic center on campus. Finally at 19 years of age, I had a tutor--not just any tutor, but one who understood learning disabilities. She had similar difficulties

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*LSD

and had been trained in this area of Special Education. She literally saved me from a life in the gutter. I quit failing and became a socially acceptable person. I earned an A.A. Degree and am in my third year at the university.

My tutor wished to help others with learning problems and established a special program at this junior college. Now I'm coordinating an effort to serve students at my university because they, too, have the right to a better and less frustrating life. Fear is non-constructive and hiding is no way to achieve positive goals.

I believe that a special learning assistance program for college students can build skills, add awareness, reduce frustrations, develop survival skills. It can raise Grade Point Averages and lead to graduation with improved self-concept. A program can do all of this if it is designed to meet specific neeeds of the individual as a whole person.

There should be no such inhumane system as I've experienced. The educational system should sharpen your mind and help you develop skills for survival; but you must be responsible for learning what you need to know, to think for yourself, and to understand the world. An individualized program can assist you to greater independence. While it builds skills, it does not tell you <u>what</u> to think. It is, in reality, a model for all educational institutions.

I have learned that labels don't really matter as long as you're independent, successful, and happy. But they can prevent you from achieving your potential. Join me in acquainting all educators with the reality of learning disorders of children. Accept the challenge of

learning differences and new ways of enhancing learning. And for the Learning Disabled students finishing high schools and Junior Colleges, introduce Learning Assistance Programs at the Universities. Who knows which of these may become our next Einstein or Edison?